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Mullen: An eyesore lingers in the canyon

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The Temple Square groundskeeper in a *Salt Lake Tribune* photo last week was busily edging one of those eye-popping colored beds of tulips and daffodils in time for General Conference. Noted the caption: "Temple Square is being spruced up."

Which tweaked Allen Sanderson all over again.

Sanderson, one of hundreds of mountain climbers who regularly scale the sheer rock faces of lower Little Cottonwood Canyon, keeps trying to get the LDS Church to just as enthusiastically spruce up the property fronting its historic granite quarry, known for 50 years as the Gate Butress. Ever since the church finished excavating 11,400 tons of granite there in 1999 for its downtown Conference Center, a chain-link fence plastered with "No Trespassing" signs has surrounded the site, on the north side of the road about 1.5 miles up the canyon.

The project was controversial. Canyon residents, claiming environmental damage and excess noise, fought Salt Lake County's decision to grant the church a zoning waiver for the work. They lost.

In permitting the operation, the county required the church to replant the area at completion. And in April 2000, the LDS Conference Center - built with the same polished canyon granite as the neighboring temple - debuted to grateful church conferencegoers.

Five years later, the 8-foot fence still stands, sections of it sagging from inattention. Periodically, orange construction cones appear at the site. Stacks of straw bales have come and gone. Because the barrier blocks them from the shortest route to the rocks, climbers have worn trails around the fence to reach their destination.

Plopped in one of the world's great geologic treasures, that fence can be summed up in one word: Ugly. The church owns the land, can generally use it as it sees fit and has generously shared it with climbers for decades.

But given their reputation for tidiness, sparkling landscapes and the fact that this canyon quarry represents a sacred site for Mormons and outdoors lovers alike, couldn't church leaders do something to pretty up this eyesore?

My sense, after phone calls this week to principle players, is that the Gate Butress has simply dropped from everyone's radar. Even Sanderson, who during the quarrying project vigorously represented The Access Fund, a national lobbying group for mountain climbers, has nearly given up hope for the fence's removal.

"My biggest disappointment is they did minimal work up there," Sanderson says. "With all the Scout troops in the church, you would think they could have kids up there every weekend planting and maintaining it."

Reclamation remains the order and expectation of Salt Lake County officials. The fence was meant to stand only until new vegetation took hold.

"The church put in saplings but says members of the public trampled them," says Jeff Daugherty, planning and development director for the county. "If the church plans to keep the property off limits permanently, it can't keep the temporary fence there." Foothill and canyon zoning rules, Daugherty says, require a permanent fence that is aesthetically pleasing and approved by the county.

"Something wrought-iron, or see-through," he says.

A church spokesman declined to answer my questions about permanent plans for the site. The church maintains it has done its part.

"All preservation work required by governmental authorities has been completed at the church-owned quarry site in Little Cottonwood Canyon," says LDS Church spokesman Dale Bills.

"The fence at Gate Butress remains in place for the present. However, climbers or other recreationists still have access to the property. Our project managers responsible for the quarry are evaluating the need for upgrading or removing the fence."

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